

THE MASTER KEY

CHAPTER XIII.

The Second Story Man.
HARRY DARNELL paced back and forth in the miserable room where Harry Wilkerson had lodged her and her maid pending the outcome of his wild plotting to get possession of Ruth Gailon's precious papers. Her handsome and cruel face was clouded with slow wrath, and she clenched her hands now and again till the knuckles were white.

For one thing, Mrs. Darnell loved the plush of life. Physical luxury was her highest wish, the goal of her loftiest ambition, the one price she had set on her soul. The dull surroundings she had been forced to accept nauseated her. She hated Wilkerson for making her uncomfortable.

So when he came in, walking very slowly and quietly, she turned on him like a wildcat.

"Take me out of here!" she panted. "I won't stay here another hour, Ruth or no Ruth!"

Wilkerson flushed. "I'm sorry," he rasped, "but Drake made a mess of the whole affair, the police are after Sing Wah and that girl got away."

Mrs. Darnell stopped in her almost hysterical walk about the room and stared at Wilkerson with burning eyes.

He returned her look defiantly. "I'd never had to do all this if you had done your part long ago and got the papers when you was in your charge," he said. "But there is no use in crying over what can't be helped."

At this moment Drake entered, presenting himself solemnly. He had already received Wilkerson's acrid compliments on his astuteness in failure, and he expected nothing less from Mrs. Darnell. He was ready to quit the conspiracy.

John's quick instinct did not fail her, and she instantly smiled on Drake and murmured: "You poor boy! Now tell me all about it!"

When he had finished his relation of the morning's experiences, with much emphasis on the shooting and his narrow escape from Sing Wah's den, she looked at him thoughtfully.

"It was a madman's scheme," she said. She turned to Wilkerson. "Harry, you need to do things better. Use your wits! This isn't the desert. Force won't avail and time is getting short. We must have those papers immediately and raise the money on them and get enough capital added to find the old plan to the mother lode of the 'Master Key' mine. Use your wits!"

For a long moment the three of them stood in silence. Then Wilkerson smiled sardonically.

"All right, Jean, I think I understand you. I'll see what I can do today. First I must find out a few things. Drake and I will go together."

"Thanks," said the young man dryly. "I have a notion that I'm about fed up with your plans and plots."

Before Wilkerson could respond with the bitter reproaches ready on his lips Mrs. Darnell interposed, catching her own unruly temper.

"George," she said, looking at him with suddenly soft eyes, "I know just how you feel. But it means everything to me to all of me. I have trusted you so, and if you fail me now—"

She threw out her arms in a gesture of pleading. Then she came closer to him.

"I ain't working that lay any more," was the sulky answer.

Wilkerson leaned across the table, and his lean face held a very evil expression on it. "Not working? But you'd do a turn for an old friend, wouldn't you, especially when there's a lot of good, safe money in it?"

As if hypnotized, Pell stared into the dark eyes fixed on his and swallowed chokingly.

"I know you would," said Wilkerson, wilfully misinterpreting his inarticulate groan. "Now to business, Sam!"

"Henry!" rasped the other. "My name's Henry now. Don't call me Sam."

"Well, Henry," said Wilkerson soothingly. "I declare, I do forget names so easily. Now, I want to explain my little proposition. It's just in your line, Sam—Henry."

Pell bit his finger nails and squirmed on his seat. But when the man opposite him casually pulled out a heavy purse and as he heard the clink of gold he subsided.

Very mildly and curiously Wilkerson told him of the existence of a bundle of papers that he wished to "recover." He laid only enough emphasis on their character to enable Pell to identify them on sight and concluded by saying: "It's worth money in your pocket to locate them and get them back. Find a girl named Ruth Gailon in one of the hotels here. She has the papers."

Pell rose nervously. "Not for me, Wilkerson."

Wilkerson rose, too, quite undisturbed. "We'll just walk down the street together with you, Sam—Henry, and I can explain a little more clearly."

The outcome was that half an hour later Pell took \$50 advance from Wilkerson and promised to recover the papers for him. Before they parted the latter made several little jokes which Drake could not see the point of, but which seemed to make Pell sick with terror.

"Who is that fellow?" Drake demanded as they were returning to their lodgings.

Harry Wilkerson laughed bitterly. "The best hotel worker and second before very long, Jean. Better stay

right here so that I can get you on the phone if necessary."

"Oh, I'll stay here!" she smiled. "That seems to be my role—staying where you put me."

He stepped very close to her and looked into her stormy eyes. "And if I put you where you most want to be in the world?"

She saw the passion flaming, as if the man's soul were on fire, and drew back fearfully. Wilkerson understood that movement and laughed grimly. She feared him, and he feasted on the terrors he inspired, even where he also loved.

Once out on the street, Drake suddenly followed his companion's lead into a still lower quarter of the town. Back with his own thoughts and still shaken from his experience of the morning, he did not notice that Wilkerson was evidently on the lookout for some one. Once or twice he stopped to think. Once he greeted an old acquaintance and carried on a low voiced conversation, of which Drake heard nothing except the name "Pell" and "the usually hangs out around Adam's poolroom."

When Wilkerson rejoined him Drake said peevishly, "Where to now?"

"I've got my scheme and my man," was the reply. "It'll be plain sailing from now on."

A moment later Drake was surprised to see Wilkerson step to one side directly into the path of a pale faced, quietly dressed young man of about thirty years of age. The individual stopped, stared at the man who had so rudely interrupted his walk and then recoiled.

"Harry!" he stammered.

Wilkerson smiled cruelly, but said nothing. The other repeated the name and went on. "Are you here? Why are you here?"

His dread was so evident that Drake looked at him curiously. It was strange what a number of queer acquaintances Wilkerson had and how deeply most of them seemed to fear him. He listened intently to his companion's drawing tones.

"Yes, I'm Harry Wilkerson. I was looking for you, Pell."

The man he addressed flicked his dry lips and smiled a smile. "Long time I no see you!" he said in an attempt at a jesting tone.

"How long is it, now?" Wilkerson said as if to himself. "You got five years?"

"For God's sake, man, be quiet!" whispered Pell. "I—no one knows me here, and I'm on the square now too."

"You mean the police don't know you?" gasped Wilkerson. "But then, I know you, old sport. You wouldn't say now that I wasn't an old friend, would you?"

Pell grudgingly accepted the hand held out and shook it feebly.

"We'll just go to some nice place and sit down and talk over old times," Wilkerson remarked pleasantly.

"But I've got a date, I'm working downtown," protested Pell miserably.

"Working?" demanded Wilkerson mockingly. "Since when has old Sam Pell been working? Answer! Since he was broke." He laughed loudly.

"I came out here to live on the level," pleaded the other, his foxlike face white with fear.

"Things too hot for you in the town east? Well, I never went back on a pal, did I, Sam? And I'm not going back on you now. I'm going to put you in the way of some coin."

At this point they turned into a small Greek cafe, and Wilkerson ordered coffee all around. When they had been served and were alone he introduced Drake and Pell and remarked to the former: "Sam Pell is known as the slickest man in his line. Ain't you, Sam?"

"I ain't working that lay any more," was the sulky answer.

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Harry Wilkerson laughed bitterly. "The best hotel worker and second before very long, Jean. Better stay

story man in America," he replied.

"But he's lost his nerve."

"I don't like the way we're getting mixed up with all sorts of crooks in this business," said Drake crossly. "I went into this to oblige Jean and—"

"Help yourself!" Wilkerson finished for him. "I notice that Mrs. Darnell and I are putting up the coin and doing the work so far. Where's your kick?"

The evil spell that Wilkerson had cast over so many weaklings closed about George Drake, and he was silent.

Just how it was that she found herself again in the same room in the hotel Ruth could not have told her but terrible experiences of the night and

morning. But John had hurried her into a cab, ordered it driven to the Marx and quickly made arrangements for Ruth to occupy his room with a maid to look after her.

"All my clothes are with that horrid woman," she whispered.

"I'll fix you out, and then we'll go shopping," was the retort.

With the help of the maid and the housekeeper Ruth was presently made presentable for the street, and John, in dry clothes and none the worse for his ducking, met her in the lobby.

"I have engaged a taxi by the hour," he told her. "I think it will rest you more to get the fresh air and dig around in the shops among the pretties than it will to brood in your own room."

Ruth hesitated shyly. "But I have no money, John."

"Oh!" he said blankly, and then a thought came to him. "Why, here I am carrying around a lot of the ranch money which I was going to turn over to you."

Once in the taxi Ruth told him of her experiences from the time she had left the mine. John listened soberly, though once in awhile a heavy frown on his cheeks betrayed his deep seated anger at the plotters who had not only tried to deprive her of her mine, but had finally risked her life and liberty.

"It's all that man Wilkerson," he said when she had finished. "He causes your father to make him superintendent of the mine and then hounded him into his grave. He is your bad angel, Ruth. But I am here now, and I'll get busy with Everett and finish things up, and we'll soon be back at the mine and have things going again."

He answered her questions about the situation at the "Master Key" as best he could; he realized that her nerves were badly shaken. He would trust to old Tom Kane to hold the fort in the meantime while he transacted the necessary business in San Francisco.

He directed the chauffeur to drive them through the shopping district, and while Ruth spent several hours in replenishing her wardrobe John sat in the taxi and studied things out. But he was continually seeing Wilkerson's dark face before him, and before they returned to the hotel he had determined to find out where he was and what he was doing.

While Ruth went to her room to dress for dinner John sat in the lobby and completed his plans. He did not observe a slender, quietly dressed young man with a very pale face, who sauntered in and out with an occasional trip to the cigar stand to light a fresh cigarette. It was Henry Pell.

The ex-thief had spent the day going from hotel to hotel, searching the registers. It was only at last that he went to the Marx. There he found the name "Ruth Gailon" on the register and below it "John Dorr." This he reported to Wilkerson, who swore furiously, but emphasized the necessity of getting hold of the papers immediately.

"And I trust you to do it," he said meaningly.

Pell, flushed with drugs, nodded feebly. "I'll get 'em, all right, Dorr!" he said, but did not add his innermost thought, which was that with the papers once in his own possession, he could easily get much more from Wilkerson than the \$200 he had promised.

"When will you have them?" Wilkerson went on impatiently.

Pell smiled faintly, but significantly. "I know your address," he remarked. "I'll deliver them there when I get them."

"But when?" growled the other.

Pell flicked his cigarette stub into the gutter and whistled. "I never make dates ahead," he said quietly. "But it won't be long."

"Have you your plan all schemed out?"

Pell winked and moved off.

Winked and moved off.

Winked and moved off.

Winked and moved off.

Winked and moved off.

Winked and moved off.

Winked and moved off.

Winked and moved off.

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CHAPTER XIV.

The Fight on the Roof.

WILKERSON did not follow Pell. After all Pell was a dangerous customer and a man who worked secretly and in his own way. It was like Wilkerson to respect a fellow crook's special methods and mannerisms. He never interfered with an expert when that expert was working for him.

But he could not refrain from a furtive glance in the lobby of the hotel. He saw John Dorr there, still hearing the bruises and burns gained in the wreck of the auto truck. He stared at him, for there was something uncanny in seeing in the flesh the man he had thought to have killed. Then he went swiftly away, as Ruth came out of the elevator and joined Dorr.

At supper both Ruth and John were silent, not only from weariness, but because they had not settled things yet. Everett hadn't been seen nor any preparations made for the raising of the money needed to improve the "Master Key" mine. So by mutual consent they made a short meal of it. In the lobby they sat and talked a little while, but presently Ruth had to confess that she was worn out.

"Of course you are," said John reproachfully. "I'll take you right up and turn you over to your maid. A good night's rest will set you on your feet again."

"I shall dream of that horrible Chinaman!" she murmured, shuddering.

"Don't let that worry you," he said comfortingly. "I have a room right near yours, and if you want help I'll be there."

She thanked him, and together they entered the elevator and were lifted to their floor. In the hallway Ruth gravely shook hands and said "Good night." John tried to hold her little hand longer than was needful, but she shook her head and slipped away to her own room. Just down a short hall he watched her open the door and turned to go to his own room when a thought struck him, and he called gently, "Ruth!"

She came back quietly. "I'm so glad you called me," she said, with evident nervousness. "After all, it's ridiculous, I'm early to go to bed. Let's go for a ride some more."

They went out through Golden Gate park and after a brief stop on the bright beach came back into town by way of the Presidio.

Ruth was now quieted, and as they got out at the hotel she sighed happily.

"That was beautiful, John," she said. At the desk the clerk handed John a note addressed in a crabbed hand. He tore it open, glanced at the contents and turned to Ruth.

"Old Tom Kane got here tonight!" he exclaimed. "He came while we were out and left this note for me."

Ruth's face lit up wonderfully. "Where is he? Where is he?" she demanded. "I want to see him."

At her door he left her with a hasty "I'll be right in as soon as Tom comes, Ruth."

"All right!" she called back, and opened her door to see the light of the night within. A tall man in a light mask was delving into the desk and rummaging among her papers and belongings. At the sight of her he quickly thrust a bundle of papers into his pocket and slipped toward the open window. Then Ruth understood and screamed for help.

John Dorr heard that call and in three bounds was in her room. She pointed to the open window, gasping: "That way! The thief! He stole the deeds!"

Without a word Dorr leaped to the window. It opened on a fire escape. He peered down. No one. He looked up. A slight figure was mounting quickly and silently toward the roof.

Within another instant John had swung himself out on the ladder and was climbing rapidly after the unknown burglar. He paid no attention to Ruth's agonized cry after him: "John! John! Don't go after him! He'll hurt you!"

Helplessly she peered out of the window and saw the two figures going swiftly up toward the crest of the building. The seconds seemed hours as she watched. Then she saw John stumble and catch himself. That decided her. She picked up her skirts and stepped out on the platform herself. Then she glancingly swung herself out on the iron ladder and commenced to climb upward. She saw the thief reach the cornice and crawl over, then John. She struggled on up sobbingly, brushing her tender hands on the rusty rods. Once or twice she stopped and called: "John! John!"

There was no answer.

Then she realized that there was another on the ladder below her. She nearly lost her grip and fell. Surely it must be some accomplice of the thief! She hastened her way up the ladder, not daring to look down again.

At last she gained the cornice, where the ladder bent suddenly outward and she must perform almost hanging suspended by her hands. But she managed to surmount this difficulty and stumbled forward on the roof of the hotel.

At first glance she saw no one. The roof was huge, broken here and there by skylights and chimneys and air shafts. The shadows cast by the moon lay dark and strange across the tarry gravel.

"John! John!" she called softly. Then again, in terror, she cried shrilly: "John! Oh, John!"

At that moment the figure of the masked man slipped from behind one of the chimneys and made for the fire escape. She realized that he was escaping. Where was John? She waved. Could he be killed? She cried again, "John!"

She stood directly in the way of the

man making for the ladder, and he paused at the sight of that eerie figure. The hesitation was fatal to his purpose. Dorr darted across the roof and grasped for him. With a swift turn the thief leaped over a skylight and commenced to run hither and thither, trying to evade John, who was not to be put off now that he had full sight of his quarry.

Ruth watched the chase with hands tensely clasped over her bosom. She could not stir from her position in the full moonlight, near the edge of the roof, nor did she move when Dorr finally caught his man and tripped him.

They fell together on the roof and rolled over and over, each trying to balk the other of a good hold. The fighting was furious, for Pell, still under the spell of drugs, was possessed of tremendous strength which even Dorr's hard muscles could not overcome.

Suddenly Ruth heard a familiar voice behind her saying, "I'll be damned if it isn't a fight!" She did not turn. Her eyes were fixed on the two writhing men.

Suddenly Pell started to roll over toward the edge of the roof, dragging John after him. This new danger appalled the girl. She watched with fascinated eyes.

John Dorr was well out of breath by this time and knew his man. It was a desperate struggle, for the thief was fighting for his freedom and possibly his life. So Dorr settled down to hold him until his wild strength ebbed and he could handle him.

Henry Pell, on the other hand, knew precisely his plight and saw with exactness what would happen to him unless he escaped. The huge arms that tied him down, like all men of his class, he was averse to carrying weapons. Tonight he cursed himself for being unarmed. One shot, the fire escape and away! That being impossible, he planned another mode of getting away. In pursuance of it, he gradually worked himself nearer and nearer to the escape ladder. If he could once get his hands on those iron rails and swing himself over, his assailant must inevitably either let go or drop over. Pell knew the steel strength of his own arms, practiced for years in just such tricks.

But the presence of a second man right in front of the ladder, as he perceived through his blurred eyes, rendered that hope out of the question. In desperate fury he kicked Dorr violently, tore one arm loose and drove his body fast like a bullet into John's throat.

This forced Dorr for the moment to let him go. Pell rushed swiftly toward the ladder. He was halted by the sight of a perfectly level gun held in the hand of a man who evidently knew how to use it. He darted back, and John caught him again, this time with a well directed blow that felled him.

A second later the thief was helpless, lying almost at the very edge of the roof. He was trapped and he knew it. There was but one thing to do, get rid of the evidence that he had been following. With a shrill cry of effort, he managed to send the bundle of papers which had fallen out of his pocket over the railing and into the air. Then he choked up to Dorr.

"Are you mad?"

"Mad?" panted Dorr, letting his hold relax. At this moment Ruth came out of her stupor and ran up to them, followed up by an old man, who had also

come up the fire escape. Ruth cried out, "John!" then "Are you hurt, John?"

"Ruth!" he gasped. Then his eyes lit on the form behind her and he shouted, "Tom Kane!"

By this time the tumult had attracted attention in the hotel and a half dozen employees and the house detective emerged from the stairway to demand an explanation.

John started to explain, loosening his hold on the prostrate thief, when the latter with a quick twist of his little body fled himself and darted away. Dorr stood after him instantly.

The chase was a short one. John caught him near the edge of the roof, tackled him low, and they crashed down together. The thief got up on a curious light, managing to get on his feet again in spite of his captor's efforts to hold him till help came. Seeing that he was about to escape him, John made one last desperate grapple, caught him fairly and threw him heavily, but not upon the roof.

Unwittingly they had got to the very edge of the roof in their fight, and Pell was hung clean into the air, to fall swiftly to the street below.

"My God!" cried the detective, running up and peering over. "You have killed him!"

It took some time to make matters clear; still longer for the detective to assure himself of the truth of John's statements.

Meanwhile officers from the central station had arrived, called by the policeman on the beat. To them also Dorr had to tell his story.

"Well, the fellow was a crook all right," conceded the sergeant, "for he had plenty of cocaine on him and a little Jimmy."

"It was an accident, my throwing him over the edge," John protested. "I was merely trying to prevent his escape."

Ruth was then interrogated, and after listening to her story the whole party went down to her room.

"We'd better see what he got, if anything," said the detective sergeant.

"He may have taken other things," she faltered, "but all I saw was the papers."

"Well, we'll have a look—see for papers," responded the detective sardonically. When the officers had gone away Ruth turned and gazed at the coat of the "Master Key" with untended affection and delight.

"Tom, whatever brought you here?" she demanded at last.

Kane scratched his head and glanced hastily at John. Then he looked at Ruth, so fair in the moonlight, and said gently: "Why, Ruthie, I just thought I couldn't stay away from old San Francisco when I knew you was here. So I came right up."

"And the mine?"

"The mine? Why, ain't John told you? The boys are already working on that new lead. Everything is hot! Ye don't suppose old Tom Kane would have left if everything hadn't been all right?"

She impulsively threw her arms about his neck and hugged him.

"You are the best old dear that ever was, and I have a thousand things to tell you!"

"How did you get up here?" asked John curiously.

Kane laughed and looked at his rusty hands. "They told me Ruth was in her room, and when I got there I found the door open